

# County takes truants to court

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The establishment of a “Truancy Court Pilot Program” kicked off Wednesday at Francis Scott Key Middle School in Silver Spring with Montgomery County Public Schools Superintendent Jerry Weast and Board of Education President Patricia O’Neill. The program will target habitually truant students by using a court-like situation to get at the root of truancy issues and hopefully help the student find a solution.

“Students who may not otherwise listen to an adult will often sit up and take notice when they appear before a judge,” said County Council Vice President Valerie Ervin who supports the project. “Once we have their attention, the real work starts with the truancy-court team figuring out why students are not participating fully in school.”

MCPS students and their parents will be encouraged to participate in the Truancy Court Program, which will meet weekly on school campuses in a court-like setting that will include a volunteer judge, a team of school representatives, a coordinator from the University of Baltimore’s School of Law and the truant child. Parents of the student will be asked but are not required to attend the meeting. Sentences will include requiring the student to attend special after-school character-building classes and in-school meetings with updates on the student’s status.

“While Montgomery County does not have a widespread truancy problem, we still have too many students who are missing school on a regular basis,” O’Neill said. A countywide report from the Office of Legislative Oversight released last month revealed around 1 percent of county students are considered “truant,” or missing more than 36 days in a school year, and another 8 percent are considered “habitually absent,” meaning they have missed 18 or more school days. OLO’s report shows that 984 students of MCPS students were classified as habitually truant.

“We can’t educate students who aren’t in school, so it is vitally important that, as a community, we emphasize the real impact of truancy,” Weast said. “This program will help us individually address the root causes of truancy for a student and come up with specific strategies to address the problem.”

Maryland law limits what local law enforcement can do with truant students, giving them no room to impose criminal charges or arrest people for truancy alone. The OLO report states, “In the vast majority of cases, Montgomery County police officers cannot stop or detain students who they find out of school during a school day simply because they are not in school.”

The state law can, however, charge a person with misdemeanor criminal penalty if that person helps a child miss school without an appropriate excuse. The OLO report recommended “behavioral changes, not punitive measures,” should be sought to help the chronically absent students.

Ervin and State’s Attorney John McCarthy have partnered on the Truancy Court Project. The project has seen success in Baltimore, where schools boast an overall 50 percent to 75 percent decrease in school absences.

“Truancy is a real issue that exists and the efforts of our many community partners to meaningfully address this issue is a significant step toward reengaging students in their education and reducing their involvement in risky behaviors including criminal behavior,” McCarthy said. “I am thrilled to be part of this project.”